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Maps and movies: talking with Deepa Mehta

Abstract

In December 2007, I met Deepa Mehta at a suburban mall in Brampton, a city in greater Toronto with a substantial Indian settlement. She was in the production phase of her forthcoming film, *Heaven on Earth* (Mehta 2008), which about the spousal abuse rampant amongst Punjabi families living in Canada. Some of the scenes were being shot amidst the city's hustle and bustle, with regular shoppers stopping to see what the fuss was about, and Mehta's assistant, Dusty Mancinelli, graciously permitting me to film from a distance.

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Maps and Movies: Talking with Deepa Mehta

Sukhmani Khorana

In December 2007, I met Deepa Mehta at a suburban mall in Brampton, a city in greater Toronto with a substantial Indian settlement. She was in the production phase of her forthcoming film, *Heaven on Earth* (Mehta 2008), which about the spousal abuse rampant amongst Punjabi families living in Canada. Some of the scenes were being shot amidst the city's hustle and bustle, with regular shoppers stopping to see what the fuss was about, and Mehta's assistant, Dusty Mancinelli, graciously permitting me to film from a distance. Other scenes would take place in a makeshift Canadian classroom that had been created by Hamilton-Mehta Productions in a dilapidated part of the mall. While waiting for Mehta to get some free time, my aunt, a local, pointed out that Brampton isn't the most upscale part of Toronto, being notorious for ethnic ghettos and substandard public health care. I figured Mehta's latest narrative, this time about diasporic Indians rather than those based in the homeland, fit right into the socioeconomic landscape of *desi* ¹ Toronto. Would it get rave reviews from Western critics, like her elements film trilogy (comprising *Fire*, *Earth*, and the Oscar-nominated *Water* [Mehta 1996, 1998, 2005]), and receive the indifference or condemnation of the mother country? Did she care about these reviews? Was Deepa Mehta the pet hate figure of Hindu fundamentalists as fearless and formidable as Deepa Mehta the onset filmmaker? I couldn't wait to find out.

From my location in Australian academic and artistic institutions, I had been using Mehta's elements trilogy as a springboard for my doctoral thesis and documentary on diasporic creativity. This was an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual journey not unlike the conception, development, and distribution of Mehta's border-crossing cinema. She herself is a border crosser whose *Water*, despite being in India's national language (Hindi), was a Canadian nominee in the Best Foreign Film category of the 2006 Academy Awards. During a Canadian-Indian buffet lunch with the cast and crew of *Heaven on Earth*, I observed the transnational, hyphenated identity of every aspect of her cinema. When it finally came time to interview her, we were two Indian-born women of different generations sitting on a production set with a map of Canada in the background. It was a perfect frame, a much-needed one for containing our forthcoming conversation about old homes, new homes, and the in-between cinema that transcends national and generic boundaries.

The Birth and Growth of the Trilogy

SK: You've said that you started thinking of the trilogy when you saw a widow in Varanasi during the shooting of George Lucas's (1992–1993) *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. Is that when you thought about *Water*, or the entire trilogy?

DM: It didn't happen like that [thinking of the trilogy sequence]. I was shooting in Varanasi, and that's the first time. You know you read about widows—my grandmother is a widow—but I had never seen such institutionalization of widows until I went to Varanasi. There was a widow there called Gyanvati who was about 80 years old, and through her I got to know about ashrams and found it very moving. I thought that if I make a film, it would be about something surrounding widows; then I forgot about it. Then I wrote *Fire*.

SK: So you weren't thinking of a trilogy. Was it organic?

DM: Yes, it was very organic. I wrote *Fire* and shot it, and near the end of it, Shabana Azmi, who plays the lead character Radha, said "What's your next film about?" I told her that I was going to do a film about partition based on Bapsi Sidhwa's book, *Cracking India*. So she said, what's it called, and it just came out—I said *Earth*. It literally just happened like that because it is about the division of the earth, but it is also metaphoric—what does our *matrubhoomi* mean to us? It made perfect sense, then, to make *Water* [discussed previously], and I knew *Water* again would be a metaphor for life, and the flow of life, and purity of water, stagnation of water.

SK: Just like tradition.

DM: Yes, like tradition. So I guess *Fire* became about the politics of sexuality, *Earth* about the politics of war and nation, and *Water* became about the politics of religion from a female point of view.

SK: You are saying it "became" about the politics of religion.

DM: Yeah, because I'm not going to say I'll sit and write a book or a film or a script about the politics of religion. What does that mean? Nothing. It becomes something while you are writing it. And while shooting it, it should go to another plane because if you just stick to the script page, it is very boring. So it was within the evolution of the film that it became something.

The Influence of Home and Abroad

SK: I find it fascinating that you've said it was only when you were in Varanasi that you realized what was happening to the widows. This is true for me also to some extent. So do you

think when you are overseas and you return to the homeland you look at your country from a different pair of eyes?

DM: I can't answer that because I haven't [looked at India differently after going overseas]. All I know is that even before I left India and got married and came to Toronto, the first short film I made was for the Ministry of Family Planning. It was about a girl who was a sweeper's daughter, and she was getting married at the age of fourteen. I was intrigued by her story. It wasn't a study or in any way an academic film. She was a frightened young girl, and yet she was so excited because she was going to get new clothes. It just caught my imagination, and I thought I would like to document it.

SK: Do you think going overseas influences you in terms of the directors you watch?

DM: When I was growing up in Delhi and I went to university in Delhi, I used to watch [Indian] films. I grew up with a very healthy dose of Indian commercial cinema. My father was a film distributor, so from a very young age I saw commercial Indian cinema. But once I went to university, or even my last year of school, I really started watching and enjoying Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak and had exposure to non-Hindi cinema and non-Hollywood cinema. At university, I was also exposed to directors like Truffaut and Godard. There was also intense exposure to Japanese cinema. So, Ozu, Mizoguchi.

SK: Do directors like Ray influence you more in terms of the content of your films or film technique? I see a certain humanitarianism in his films that is also present in yours. I'm sure it's not deliberate, but is there a certain kind of resonance there?

DM: I've said this often, and I continue to quote it. Again, a filmmaker that I really admire, Luis Bunuel, has said that "it's only when a film is specific does it become universal." I think it's much easier for me to tell a story that I'm familiar with, whether it's as a woman or whether it's

about a subject that I would like to know more about. So, for me, while I'm writing the script, or researching the film, or even making the film, I'm still learning. So I never do a film where I think I know all about it because I think that's terribly boring. The process of exploration is what really intrigues me, and especially if it's on a subject that I really care about. For example, right now we are shooting *Heaven on Earth*, and it's very specific. It's about the Punjabi immigrant community in contemporary Toronto. That's a subject that has intrigued me for a long time. It's very difficult for people who come from Ludhiana, or Hoshiarpur, or small towns like the districts of Bhatinda to come here soon after marriage and start working in factories the next day. That's their life. Spousal abuse is enormous.

The New Home

SK: Is the Canadian government active in doing anything about it [spousal abuse]?

DM: I don't think they have a clue how to deal with it. That's the tragedy. Whether it's a Punjabi, Tamil, or Sikh [family], an Asian woman will never call 911. There is a question of losing one's dignity. It's shameful, so the government has no clue how to deal with them. But what we have in Canada right now is amazing. There is a Sikh gentleman here called Baldev Bhattal, and [the Sikhs] do an enormous amount of work with women who have suffered domestic violence or spousal abuse because they know how to talk to them. And they also do lot of work with the men themselves because they recognize that everybody is a victim because the dynamics of immigration really turn the values that felt right at home and were working back home upside down. So the dynamics of the household change, and you want to maintain them, but you can't. The stress of

trying to maintain something that is nonexistent and doesn't work for you shows on a woman first, but that doesn't mean that men aren't victims as well.

SK: That's a very interesting way of looking at it because Indian culture is often depicted as parochial with the men in a dominant, chauvinistic position.

DM: I don't think so. I think that is naive and perhaps a bit outdated. Before *Heaven on Earth*, I did a documentary on the issue.

SK: Is that where you gave cameras to the children of these couples?

DM: Yeah. Being a Punjabi, born in Amritsar, speaking Punjabi, I could read *Gurmukhi*.³ Everybody took French and German in school, but I said no, I will take *Gurmukhi*. I was the only one in my class. But it was good because now, years later, I can pick up a newspaper and read, and it's been fascinating to do that. So I couldn't have done a film like *Heaven on Earth* unless I was very specific. Once you stop being specific, it dilutes the subject.

The Audience(s)

SK: Would you consider your film as appealing to the Punjabi immigrant community in Canada?

DM: I really don't think about such things. Somebody once asked me, "Who are your films for?" and I said intelligent people. It doesn't matter what color they are, what gender they are, or what race they are.

SK: But I wish some of these "nonintelligent" people would go to a film festival or an alternative cinema.

DM: But they don't.

SK: Then it's like preaching to the converted. With intelligent people, if you give them a film like yours, they might say, that makes sense and we see where she is coming from. But what about the people who are never going to see them?

DM: I consider myself an intelligent person, but there is still so much that I don't know about. So if I see a film like Kusturica's [1988] *Time of the Gypsies*, I would be exposed to something new as I can't be expected to know about everything. For me, that's interesting. So there are filmmakers whose work sometimes opens windows. It isn't necessary that all intelligent people see all films. I don't write a film and say it's for women, or colored women, or Punjabi women. You can't, because then you stop writing for yourself, which is the only reason that you write.

SK: I was talking to David Hamilton [the producer of the trilogy], and he said to me that *Water*, in some ways, could be considered a crossover film because many people who may not otherwise watch an art film did actually watch *Water*. So what do you think makes a film more accessible even though it may be in the art category? Is it the promotion, or the way it's made, or something else?

DM: I don't know. I have no idea. If we look at *Water*, when we finished the film, we didn't have distribution for it. It isn't that Fox read the script and said okay, go ahead and make it. We only had Canadian distribution. So who knows? I didn't know it would be picked up by Fox Searchlight.

The Creative Process

SK: When you are writing a script, do you start with an image, or a story, or something else?

DM: For me, it always starts with a question. I remember very distinctly with *Fire* saying something about women and choices, about the lack of them, or the limitations on them, in Delhi. I asked my friend, “What do you think would happen if an Indian woman from a working, middle-class family made a choice that was an extreme choice?” It’s difficult enough making little choices like today I’m not going to go to work, today I’m not feeling well, today I’m not going to cook dinner, or something like that. So the film came out of the question of extreme choice, and what is the fallout of that. I’ve always started out that way. When I wrote *Water*, the environment was rampant with questions about the place of religion. When I wrote *Heaven on Earth*, I was reading the papers every day in Toronto about spousal abuse in the Punjabi community. And just learning more about the issue by talking to Bhuttal, talking to the men, talking to the women, and realizing that it is not very clear who the victims are. So it’s always a question that starts my scripts.

SK: You are probably the only filmmaker that I can think of, not just in Bollywood, but also amongst the diasporic directors like Mira Nair, who goes to the past of India. Do you think you have a particular fascination with India’s history?

DM: I thought I’d go back in time. So *Fire* was contemporary India, *Earth* was during the time of partition, and *Water* was further back.

SK: Is there a reason why you wanted to go back to the past?

DM: I think one has to learn from the past or at least examine it because we are here because of where we were.

The Relationship with Bollywood

SK: I don’t understand why Bollywood directors aren’t interested in history.

DM: I'm not a Bollywood director. I'm really not.

SK: That's true. But would you say you are using Indian actors in some of your films? I remember reading in Devyani's book [see Saltzman 2006] about John Abraham arriving later than scheduled for some rehearsals. Do you think that the transition from Bollywood to your sort of cinema is easy for them?

DM: I worked with Aamir Khan, who is amazing. The talent [pool] of Indian actors in the West will grow with time but is sadly very limited. One is stuck with Navin Andrews and Jimi Mistry, and that's it. There aren't many roles, so the opportunities are extremely scarce. There is an incredible pool of talent in India, so I feel very fortunate to be able to tap into that. When I cast John, everybody thought I was nuts because he was known for his tight jeans, or abs or something, but I knew that he was just right. It's the same with Aamir Khan too. Both John and Aamir were extremely professional. We've got a Bollywood star, Preity Zinta, in *Heaven on Earth*, and she is delightful. She is professional, always on time, and also extremely talented and right for the role.

SK: So when you were growing up and your father was a film distributor, did he have any contacts in Bollywood? Did anyone influence you in the filmmaking direction?

DM: Because my father owned movie halls as well, we used to have these actors who came over all the time. He distributed Raj Kapoor films, so people like Raj Kapoor and Vyjanthimla would come over. When I was young, it wasn't very cool to like Indian films.

SK: So it developed over time?

DM: As I grew older, I started liking Indian films. I still do, and I find it's the best escapist cinema.

SK: I like the films of that period.

DM: Films like *Sujata* and others by Bimal Roy [1959]. They are lovely films not because they have the songs, but they actually are about something. Even Guru Dutt's films like *Pyaasa* [1957] and *Sautela Bhai* [1962] are wonderful films.

SK: I wonder why it's changed now.

DM: I'm not a Bollywood expert, but I think that, you've done economics as you said, and everything stems from that. There is a trend toward sales and who will follow it. Once it stops selling, another trend starts.

SK: Do you feel that a film like *Water* is about India and must have an impact there? Are you saddened that it was released later in India?

DM: I wish it could have been, maybe if I got lucky. But then Ravi Chopra, who is not a distributor, actually said, I will distribute it because I want every Indian to see it. It was so nice of him. So maybe even if twenty people saw it, that is good.

SK: Do you think *Heaven on Earth* is going to be released in India the same time as the rest of the world?

DM: I really don't think of that. I really don't know how a film is going to turn out. I don't say I'm doing a film and it's going to open this time. Every film has its own life. It's wonderful when it takes shape, and you can't always fit it in a certain direction. To make a film is so difficult, and it has a life of its own. To try and maneuver or manipulate it into what you want it to be, rather than what it is, is a big mistake.

SK: That certainly seems to have happened with *Water*.

DM: With all my films. Everyone said, *Water* will find its audience, and it did. It touched many people, and it offended the people that wanted to be offended by it.

The Future (and the Past)

SK: Do you have other projects in India coming?

DM: Yeah, there is a project called “Stella” [released as *Cooking with Stella* (Mehta 2009)], which I’m codirecting with my brother. We’ll start shooting at the end of February if I’m still alive. After that, a project that I’m really interested in is called “Land of the Morning Calm.” It’s a film about an ordinary young woman in her forties who got married into a Korean royal family. Royalty really intrigues me.

SK: Is it based on something?

DM: It’s a true story. I’ve written half the script.

SK: Do you usually take a while to write a script?

DM: I usually visualize my script and the scene, and then I write it. I already know the beginning, the middle, and the end, but as far as the scenes are concerned, I have to visualize them first. People go mad when they read my scripts because there is so much detail, whether it is color, set design, or lighting.

SK: That’s why I can see the reds in *Fire*, the browns in *Earth*, and the blues in *Water*. I had to compliment Giles (the cinematographer of the trilogy).

DM: He is amazing; it is lovely to work with him.

India to Canada and Back

SK: What about your identity?

DM: When my plane lands in Toronto, I feel totally Canadian, and when it lands in Delhi, I feel totally Indian. So I'm fine; I'm really happy that I can feel completely Indian and completely Canadian.

SK: But are there aspects of your Indianness in Canada, and of your Canadianness in India, or is it separate?

DM: It's not separate. I am who I am.

SK: Was it hard in the beginning when you came to Canada?

DM: It wasn't hard at all, and I felt I was lucky. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that at that point, I was married to a Canadian, and he had his whole family and his whole network here. So it was much easier for me.

SK: Were you working in the film industry then?

DM: Yeah.

SK: Has Canadian film become more supportive of people from other backgrounds now?

DM: They better be.

SK: They nominated *Water* as their official entry to the Oscars. That was amazing.

DM: That was pretty amazing. What it did was, I think *Water* changed the way Canadians looked at their own films.

SK: *Fire* is in English, and that wasn't allowed.

DM: It depends on the bureaucracy and who is in government.

SK: If you had to tell me something about filmmaking, or how to make a good film, what advice would you give?

DM: I think it's important to do it only if you are passionate about it and if you know why you are passionate about it. It's tough at all times, whether you are a man or a woman. I always tell

people that if you have something to say, and you want to use this medium, the medium of cinema, ask yourself why before you start. Be very clear as to why you want to do this because it is going to be very tough. I think it's really important for you, or anybody who wants to be a filmmaker, to really be honest with yourself.

Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth* was screened at various film festivals and received a limited theatrical release in Canada in 2008. She also cowrote *Cooking with Stella* with Dilip Mehta, and her latest release is *Midnight's Children* (Mehta 2012), based on Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize-winning book of the same title.

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